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FROM USMISSION TO UNESCO PARIS

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SUBJECT: OVERVIEW OF UNESCO'S WORK ON DESERTIFICATION AND
ARID ZONES

REFTEL: 05 PARIS 05855

1. INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY. At a June 13 information session, UNESCO secretariat experts discussed the continuing progress the organization has made with regard to desertification and arid zones. After outlining UNESCO's history of action in this area, panelists presented some of UNESCO's current programs to combat desertification, including the International Hydrological Program's (IHP's) Water and Development Information for Arid Lands (G-WADI) program, a new Teaching Resource Kit for teachers in arid regions, and plans for ecotourism. The presentation, part of the "60 Minutes to Convince" series celebrating UNESCO's 60th year, was timed to precede the June 19-21 conference "The Future of Drylands," that will take place in Tunis, Tunisia, to mark the International Year of Deserts and Desertification. END INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY.

COMBATING DESERTIFICATION AND CONSERVING WATER

2. Thomas Schaaf, of UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere (MAB) program, highlighted UNESCO's progress in combatting desertification over the past 50 years. He discussed how UNESCO's focus has shifted from just protecting the natural environment to evaluating human needs as well. UNESCO in recent years has also focused on information exchange, trying to replicate successes in one dryland area in others. To that end, Schaaf discussed the successes of the Sustainable Management of Marginal Drylands (SUMAMAD) project, a program that strives for sustainable conservation in the Arab States and Asia. Another successful sustainable development project lauded by the panelists (all from the UNESCO Secretariat) was the IHP's G-WADI program, whose goal is to create a global community to strengthen global capacity to manage water resources in arid and semi-arid areas. Annukka Lipponen, of the Division of Water Sciences, presented this program.

NEW INITIATIVES: TEACHER RESOURCE KITS AND ECOTOURISM

3. Panelist Helene Gille, of the Division of Ecological and Earth Sciences, described an interesting new project at MAB: Teacher Resource Kits, designed to help educate young people about arid and semi-arid environments. The lessons are for schoolchildren ages 6-15 and are meant to be incorporated into a normal curriculum. The kits are specifically targeted for teachers in arid and semi-arid areas, so children will not only understand the environment in which they live, but also in the long run will be able to combat desertification and land degradation. There are two different kits: one for dryland areas and the other for mountainous ones. So far, kits in nine languages have been distributed in over 40 countries.

4. Panelist Herve Barre, of the Division of Cultural Policies and Intercultural Dialogue, discussed the potential for ecotourism in desert and arid regions. He spoke of the rich natural and cultural heritage in the desert, and called ecotourism tourism's "new frontier." He also spoke of ecotourism's potential to promote local economies and sustainable development. One concern raised about ecotourism in the desert was that water should not be diverted from the local population to satisfy the needs of tourists.
OLIVER